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Published in:
Bangladesh Journal of Educational Research

Publication date:
2015

Citation for published version (APA):
Shohel, M., Jia, M., Jahan, R., & Roy, G. (2015). Methodological Challenges and Concerns of Using Interview Method to Conduct Socio-culturally Sensitive Research. *Bangladesh Journal of Educational Research*, 1(2), 100-115. [8].

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Methodological Challenges and Concerns of Using Interview Method to Conduct Socio-culturally Sensitive Research

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Abstract: *Researching Muslim women in the west could be challenging for some researchers with different socio-cultural or religious background. This includes sensitivity associated with religious identity, feminist view and socio-cultural aspects of the research subjects. This article used interview method, a frequently used tool for collecting data in the qualitative research paradigm by applied social scientists. The success of the interview method largely depends on the interviewees and their understanding of the research contexts. This article looks into the authors' understanding of using traditional interview method in a different cultural setting and tries to find out the challenges of using the method with Muslim women going for higher education. The interview process poses some distinct challenges to the interviewing process and needs to be addressed for a rigorous research. This article also reflects on a number of issues related to the interview process, working with the equipment (tape-recorder), flexibility of proposed schedule, and the way of posing research questions for in-depth inquiry. More importantly, it draws on both advantages and disadvantages of interview method for exploring this sensitive issue. The process of data analysis is also summarised along with the consideration of reflexivity and trustworthiness of the generated data. This article also highlights the issues related to gaining access to the participants, sampling, and ethical consideration.*

Key words: *Research methodology, interview method, Muslim women, ethnic minority, qualitative research.*

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Introduction

The process of interview may be challenging and fatiguing, even for the very competent researchers in varied cultural settings (Kvale, 1996). During the fieldwork for collecting data, the researchers may face challenges and unexpected problems dealing with real life situation (Robson, 1993). Different kinds of difficulties and barriers may arise in the field as social world is very complex and very contextual which also coiled with the lack of experience and understanding related to unfamiliarity with different cultures and fear of being rejected by interviewees (Mullings, 1999). It is more so when researchers are engaged in sensitive issues which could be helpful or harmful for individuals or communities by the conduct, publicity, and results of the research (Sieber, 1992:14). There are a few research conducted on Muslim women's education in Britain including research on Muslim women in Manchester (Scantlebury, 1995), Pakistani women in Yorkshire (Afshar, 1989; 1994), young Muslim women in Bradford (Knott and Khokher, 1993) and young women of South Asian origin in Hertfordshire (Dwyer, 2000). Based on an empirical fieldwork, this article aims to describe the challenges encountered in the process of interviewing Muslim women studying at a British university by a non-Muslim non-British female researcher.

Context of the Study

Manchester is one of the ethnically diverse cities in the United Kingdom and the home of world renowned university- the University of Manchester. This university has a very diverse student population from home and overseas. Historically this is the first university in England which allow female to pursue higher education. There are many Muslim women studying in this university from different nationalities including third generation British. But still problem remains as many Muslim women going to the university are facing challenges for their aspiration for higher education within their own family or community as well as from the wider society. This article focuses on the issue as a sensitive one and looks into the methodological challenges and concerns to explore the phenomenon.

Methodology

It was a qualitative interpretative study based on traditional face-to-face interview. There is no comprehensive study on the challenges and barriers of Muslim female students studying at the British universities. Therefore, there is lack of understanding of Muslim female students' higher education aspirations and their identity (Ahmad, 2001). Regarding developing a methodology for this study, we followed Crotty's (1998) suggestion that researchers need to ask

themselves what methodologies and methods will be employed in the research they are going to carry out. Considering the research problem, semi-structured interview was employed as the main method of data collection to carry out the research.

Ahmad (2001) used detailed semi-structured interview when she carried out her research on British South Asian Muslim women and their post-school experience. However, semi-structured interview is not the only method to interview Muslim women as we see that Afshar (1989) used a structured questionnaire and free ranging interviews lasting anything between four and eight hours. Her research was ethnographic in nature and lasted for four years.

As a research tool, *interviewing* can provide the researchers access to explore the detailed 'insider's' points of view of their research subjects, as their aim is to understand and document others' understanding (Miller and Glassner, 1997). According to May (1993:91), interview 'can yield rich sources of data on people's experiences, opinions, aspirations and feelings'.

The purpose of interviews in phenomenology research is to gain research perspective on a lived experience, familiar to those participants taking part in the research. These perspectives are best obtained via a semi-structured interview of the participant's lived experiences - one that takes the form of an everyday conversation but focused on getting to the essence of the phenomena by centering on certain themes as guiding the conversation and questions asked (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009:27). In the light of this, the semi-structured interview was chosen as the main method in this study. As Robson (1993:231) puts it:

"Through semi-structured interview, where the interviewer has worked out a set of questions in advance, but is free to modify their order based upon her perception of what seems most appropriate in the context of the 'conversation', can change the way they are worded, give explanations, leave out particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee or include additional ones".

Both open-ended and close-ended questions were used with the hope that they could function more effectively. Five open ended questions were designed focusing on the relationship between Islam and higher education, between parents and girls, university study and life. Several back up 'small questions' related to those five questions were also devised in order to get necessary information without asking the research participants directly to avoid any kind of

awkwardness and impoliteness since these Muslim women and the interviewer come from different religious backgrounds and cultures which may lead to different understanding, value and perspectives. The interviewer came up with a few ‘politically correct’ sentence in framing questions such as ‘Do you think Muslim women are facing special difficulties in the university?’ to probe the information meticulously.

Sampling and Getting Access to the Field

As the interviewer for this study was an ‘outsider’ in the cross-cultural setting (Mullings, 1999) and it was difficult to get access to the field, ‘snow-ball sampling’ (Heckathorn, 1997 and 2002) strategy was chosen for selecting research participants. Snowball sampling technique was chosen for this study as the main sampling technique since the study involves religion, culture and other issues on which there are on-going debates, it was difficult to find out research participants who were interested to take part in the study (Marshall, 1996). Biernacki and Waldorf (1981:141) state that:

“The method [snowball sampling] is well suited for a number of research purposes and is particularly applicable when the focus of the study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and this requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study”.

As it appeared, there was no alternative access to the research field despite another co-author’s effort to make it easy, and only the snowball sampling was the way to get access by finding the first research participant and then establish link with other research participants. In a similar context, Ahmad (2001) provides an example of the advantage of snow ball sampling. She contacted her interviewee with the research participants through the Pakistan Society, the Islamic Society and other various societies, thereafter via a process of snowballing. However, the snowball sampling can only represent a part of population and it may gather people who have same ideas or characters rather than a representative sample of the study population (Atkinson and Flint, 2001).

Getting access to the research field is more difficult in practice if the research focus is somewhat socio-culturally sensitive. As a non-Muslim, non-British female researcher, the interviewer of this study had experienced hardships while trying every possible way to get access to the research participants. Despite the assistance of an academic from the University of Manchester to contact the leader of the Islamic Society Manchester, a student organisation for Muslim students studying at the higher educational institutions in Manchester, to see the

possibility of finding some female Muslim members of the society who might be interested and willing to talk about their attitudes towards higher education for women in relation to their Islamic faith. While waiting to meet Muslim female students, the interviewer as a non-Muslim was reading some verses of the Quran to know more about Islam.

Although someone from the Islamic society of the university gave a light of hope, the interviewer was getting worried and began to suspect the futility of the study. What does it imply in practice? Perhaps the topic is so sensitive that these Muslim women were not willing to talk to an outsider like the interviewer who does not share the same religion, culture and ethnicity with them. Or they were busy with their personal life generally. These were the assumptions working in the interviewer's mind until the first participant attended in the interview. This primary shocking experience made the interviewer think that even if they are willing to talk, accurate information may not be obtained from them (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). Alternatively, the interviewer tried to stop a few female Muslim students who were wearing hijabs at the university library without any success. When the interviewer had reached the deepest despair, an e-mail from Ayesha (pseudonym) from the Islamic Society lit the hope again. Ayesha was very happy to assist with getting access to female Muslim students and assured providing researcher of as many research participants as the study requires. This happened because of another co-author's effort to assist the interviewer to get access through his personal network.

Decision was made to have an informal talk with Ayesha which could work out as piloting the semi-structured interview schedule with her to make sure what questions could be asked directly, what questions could be offensive, what should be consider as sensitive to the research participants when asking questions, or exploring taboos in relation to their socio-cultural practice.

Considering the difficulty to get access, still at that stage, the interviewer was thinking of other possible ways to ensure participation of enough research participants for the project. That is why, the researcher contacted a female Muslim student at the Faculty of Education, the University of Manchester. She also emailed one of her friends, a male Muslim student from Bahrain to find out prospective research participants. Both of them got back with positive news, the former was willing to be interviewed, and the latter had found a female Muslim student from his country. At last interview process was started.

Research Participants

Data was collected from seven research participants over three months in different places of the university campus. Five women were individually interviewed face-to-face and two of them were interviewed twice. Two other participants were interviewed together. Thus altogether eight interviews were conducted but only five transcriptions were made considering the usefulness of the contents of the recorded conversations.

Seven Muslim female students studying at the University of Manchester agreed to be research participants. Among them three were postgraduates and four were undergraduate students. Among the participants, some were British-born, but one of the British-born had lived in the Middle East for five years. Some are non-British-born, but one of them came to Britain at the age of sixteen. They are majoring in medicine, finance, education, etc. On the one hand, they are totally different individuals and their backgrounds vary greatly. On the other hand, as Muslims, they may have something in common because of such interrelation as faith, religion influence and values.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues in research (specially when dealing with human subjects) are concerned with the application of a series of moral principles to impede harming or wrong doing to others, to promote the good, to respect the research participants (Strauss, 2001). Therefore, considering the ethical issues as well as the privacy of the participants all research participants were given a pseudonym that means names used in this article are not real. Durations of the interviews were at least an hour or more except for two interviews. That helped to establish a rapport with the interviewees to foster a climate of trust and being natural (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Robson, 1993).

In this research, a code of practice was adopted as follows from the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011), the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002) and the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2010):

a. Informed consent: A consent form was provided to all the participants prior to conducting the interviews. Through that consent form all the participants were informed of the research and the methodological approach of face to face interview. Before each interview, the use of the tape-recorder was agreed by the interviewees who were informed that when they felt the questions or the way of asking questions unacceptable or offensive, they could tell the interviewer and refuse to answer or withdraw at any time during the research process.

b. Confidentiality and anonymity: All information recorded during the interviews was confidential, and to maintain the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were provided. For this reason, all names have been changed. And all information was used only for the purpose of the study. Collected data was used only for the academic and research purposes.

c. Avoid sensitive words: In order to respect the research participants as well as their views and culture, sensitive words such as restriction, marriage, oppression, freedom, discrimination were technically avoided. The interviewer tried her best to use neutral way to elicit answers rather than in a direct way. For example, words such as discrimination, restriction were not chosen in interviews unless they were employed by the interviewees.

Limitations

There are some limitations regarding sample size. As already mentioned, snowball sampling procedure was used in this study which usually provides the researcher those who are homogeneous to some extent as people with the same character and attitudes are more likely to mix with each other and influence each other (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). Same answers for some questions were obtained from different interviewees. However, considering all limitations, the researchers tried to understand and unfold the underlying factors associated with Muslim women's aspiration and challenges for higher education especially in the British context.

Data Analysis

The data is mainly based on transcriptions of the interviews along with small parts of research diaries and two informants' e-mails. Research diaries and e-mails from the research participants were used cautiously because of the difference between written language and spoken language. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a native speaker, a female Muslim student who grew up in Britain was invited to check all transcriptions to guarantee their accuracy.

'All researchers develop their own way of analyzing qualitative data' (Taylor and Bogdan, 1989: 129). Some researchers believe that each person may have his or her own understanding and interpretation in the process of data analysis. Therefore, Marshall (1981: 395) says that 'Whatever methods are used to make sense of data, in the end it turns out to be a very personal and individual process'. This will be further discussed in the next section as reflexivity is a great concern in the qualitative research.

Data analysis mainly depends on an individual process. But whatever the researchers are going to do, it is the norm to start with coding which is a systematic way of developing and refining interpretations of the data (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Every researcher should organise and summarise the most meaningful bits of data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). ‘What to code’ or ‘what categories to create’ always rely on the researchers’ intent of the data analysis. In other word, coding is widely used in qualitative research, but is applied in more than one way (Bryman and Burgess, 1994).

The data was analysed through the following steps. Firstly, a number of codes were designed to retain some of the details of the conversations such as intonation, pauses, repetition, laugh etc. Different words were used to describe these details rather than using symbols or numbers. Then the data was divided into small isolated ‘bits’ and set up a list of themes and headings using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) approach. For instance, headings that arose from the data were listed as follows:

- Difficulties in the university
- Choosing subjects
- Pre-university concerns
- Parental influence
- Tensions between theory and practice
- Experiences in schools and universities

Of course, it was reconciled the ‘bits’ of data under each theme, and then all relevant information was brought together on a particular theme, the headings listed already would be changed for further analysis going on.

“The application of equivalent codes, reflecting substantive research question, would be one basic way of organizing the data” (Coffey, 1996: 35).

Most research participants mentioned the most obvious identity of Muslim women- the headscarves, difficulties and discriminations against female Muslim students both in schools and university without being asked about it. So all these relevant information about these themes were put together to see how women described themselves. Finally, results of each transcription were compared to show their differences and similarities, and then summarised. They were also compared with other researchers’ findings, theorised them based on understanding and presented them in their own words.

The processes of interviewing and data analysis cannot be separated as they are always connected to each other. At the beginning, transcriptions were put aside,

hoping to analyse them later with a clear mind. But the more they were kept away, the more reading and listening were needed to do. After a while it became obvious to analyse the data immediately after the interview while the interviewer has the fresh memories to save time and effort.

Data analysis and interpretation is a time consuming task and a painstaking process. According to Silverman (1997), data analysis includes coding, grouping or summarising the descriptions to show the dynamic interrelations of *whats* and *hows*. A lot of time was invested for reading and rereading, thinking and rethinking, coding and recoding, summarising and re-summarising the collected data. In other words, the process of analysing and interpreting data is dynamic and seemingly endless. It is obvious from the experience that the more you study the data, the more you think about something valuable to discuss or present. It could be excellent if we can represent everything found in the data which is already proved as impossible within the limited scope of an article.

Reflexivity and Reliability

One of the problems related to all qualitative research is that of reflexivity and reliability of the generated data (McNiff, 1997; Silverman, 1996). When talking about the facts and feelings of the research participants, one has to be careful for using the word 'true'. As mentioned earlier, interview is a dynamic process, the response obtained through an interview depends not only on how we ask the questions, but also on other factors such as the environment, situations, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, interviewee's mood, character and so on. It is possible for the interviewer to get different and contradictory answers for the same question from the same interviewee.

It is wrong to judge that one is true and the other is false. These are the genuine or real facts for the research participants. However, the character of qualitative research itself is dynamic as well, it changes all the time and it provides multiple realities of 'truths'. As a result, validity becomes challenging for all qualitative researchers. They often ask themselves whether the research is a scientific, systematic, measurable or objective one or not, as Guba and Lincoln (1982:57) argue:

“Naturalistic inquirers...focus upon the multiple realities that, like 'the layers of an onion, nest within or complement one another. Each layer provides a different perspective of reality, and none can be considered more 'true' than any other. Phenomena do not converge into a single form, a single 'truth', but diverge into many forms, multiple 'truths'”.

The challenge here is how the researchers find out the layers of realities and when and where to stop interpretation since they are confronting a complicated world.

Validity cannot be defined simply, but it should be aspired in every research. Results from the proper application of procedures to the methodology functioning in the research always influence validity. Therefore, researchers are required to provide evidence to their hypothesis to work, to propose and conduct researchers enhancing the probability of having reliable results.

How the researchers present themselves also influence the interviewee's ability and willingness to response (Silverman, 1997). In this study, the interviewer was an overseas student like some of the women interviewed and she was minority in the British academic setting and also in her own country and she was a female who would like to hear female voice. This might be one of the possible reasons why these women told her their stories. As Punch (1994:89) puts it:

“the gender and ethnic solidarity between researcher and researched welds that relationship into one of cooperation and collaboration that represents a personal commitment and also a contribution to the interests of women in general. In this sense, the personal is related to the ethical, the moral, and the political standpoint. And you do not rip off your sister”.

The other possible reason might be that they were aware of misconception of Muslim women in general in the media as so in the mainstream British society. Therefore, they wanted to make it clear to a non-Muslim non-British interviewer (one of the researchers) that what you heard is not always the real fact. It might be that they understand Islam more than others so that they are longing to express their ideas and share them with somebody else and get the message across. They would like to show the positive side of Islam and their own interpretation of Islamic principles in relation to education and women rights. That is what non-Muslim believe is not what they believe.

Findings and Discussion

A. Understanding of interviewing process

1. Number of interviews (amount of data)

Before embarking on the interviews, we often wonder how many interviews will be enough for a specific study. It is a very common question to plague a researcher, especially a novice one (Shohel, 2010). Ely et al. (1991) experiencing the fear that they had not collected all the necessary data, but once they returned to the field to continue observation, they found the data enough because they

were repeating themselves. With regards to this, Taylor and Bogdan (1984:83) give the following advice:

“After completing interviews with several informants, you would consciously vary the type of people interviewed until you had uncovered the full range of perspectives held by the people in whom you are interested. You would have an idea that you had reached this point when interviews with additional people yield no genuinely new insights”.

In this study the exact numbers of interviews were not predicted, instead, eyes were kept on each step of each interview, and then carried out the next interview until it appeared that no new data was being unearthed. When enough information was obtained from the interviews to answer the research questions, the interviewer stopped interviewing further. Basically, how many interviews are enough, it depends on the constraints of time, energy, availability of participants, and other conditions that influence data collection (Strauss, 1998). Also, in-depth interviews tend to shed light on understanding the phenomena of the given issues rather than to generalise the findings. Hence, sample size is not really an area of concern when a qualitative research usually is done by using interview technique.

2. Working well with the equipment

If the researcher proposes to use interviews as the core source of data collection, the use of the tape-recorder is the essence. If the researcher as an interviewer is familiar with using the machine and the participants have the experience, the presence of the tape-recorder fades to the background (Markut and Morehouse, 1994). Otherwise, the presence of mic or tape-recorder can make the participants nervous and so thus it may hamper the participants' spontaneous responses.

In the process of fieldwork, the problem was not the interviewees' attitudes towards the machine, rather the interviewer's know-how. It is very essential for an interviewer to be confident with any recording equipment, but should not be embarrassed to check the tape-recorder and other accessories work well in order to capture useful data. However, in this research, the interviewer failed to do so and as a result some of her interview data was missing. After knowing the fact, the interviewee promised to answer those questions by e-mail. In fact, she did and the answers were different from what she said during the face-to-face interview. This raised another issue that interviewees' response to questions differently in different settings and times.

3. Being flexible with the research participants whenever necessary

Robson (2001) states that planning time for schedule and budgeting time for events are the crucial skills of a successful enquiry. However in the real world

settings, the researchers experience rearrangements, reconfirming and rescheduling appointments to cover absences and crises. For example, during fieldwork, the interviewer arrived at the common room on the third floor in the Department of Education to meet Fatima at 1:30pm. She waited and waited, checked e-mail again to make sure that she was in the right place at the right time. Fatima did not turn up and half an hour later the interviewer went back to the computer cluster and e-mailed her to rearrange the time. The same thing happened with Sumayyah from Bahrain. It took at least a month to find a suitable time for the interviewee. On one Friday, the researcher went to the mosque as planned to meet a girl, but she did not come because she forgot the arrangement of the interview, in such a case, it would be better to remind them or confirm their coming if there is a period of time between the appointment and the due time. All these things pushed the interviewer to reorganise her schedule and spent a lot of time without seeming to achieve anything. But obviously it was a learning process for her.

B. Sensitivity of researching Muslim women

With sensitive research topics, researchers may have difficulties to obtain accurate information (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). For example, Azim (1997) carried out a research on Muslim women in Bangalore, India. She argued that Muslim women did not speak frankly or freely before strangers. Sometimes they needed permission from male members of the family, thus, and they would like to speak only in the presence of men. In this study, one thing must be paid close attention to that is the location of interview which may have great impact on the interviewee's talking. Almost of the women were chosen the mosque as the location to conduct the interview. This might prove that these women were not willing to talk at other places when issues related to their religion. However, the interviewer wanted to respect these women's choice so that they feel comfortable to express themselves and she could carry out the study smoothly.

1. The role of interviewer

According to Cannell and Kahn (1968), as cited by Cohen and Manion (1980), also by Robson (2001:307),

“interview is defined as a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction, or explanation”.

The role of the interviewer is to ask questions and get answers relevant to the research questions, while the interviewee's role is to answer questions and

provide relevant information. Thus, some researchers suggest that the interviewer should talk less than the interviewee and listen to the answer very carefully. However, one of the issues arising here is how the interviewer should control the interview. There is a danger that the interviewee may take over the interview if the interviewer cannot handle this well, and he or she will easily be led by the informants (Smith, 1981). For instance, interview with Sumayyah was a real blow for the researcher. During the interview, she asked questions which made the interviewer feel incapable to be an interviewer. Another problem was that she had a very long story to tell. The interviewer knew she should listen to her carefully and patiently, but some stories were no evidence and no help to the topic, at least at this stage. CARE (1994) suggests that we develop a sense when and where to interrupt a garrulous interviewee, but, it is very difficult to make a judgment during the interview. As previously mentioned, when Sumayyah asked the interviewer if she could have a chance to tell a story during the interview, the interviewer could refuse her politely but failed to do so. As a result interview time lasted longer than expected. Therefore, a successful interviewer is not only a good listener, but also a good moderator and knows how to manoeuvre or moderate the interview, when and where to stop during the interview to avoid wasting time and energy.

This is also problematic when the interviewee talks less and gives very short answer to the interviewer's question. For example, Haleem always gave short answers which required the interviewer to search for back up questions after using up all ones. So the interviewer began to talk about Muslim women in her home country. It is interesting to notice that the interviewer became the story teller and forgot the interviewer's role. There is a danger here to waste time as well as manipulate the answers of the interviewee. As a result, this could damage the interview process as well as quality of the responses to the interview questions.

2. The ways of asking questions

Question-asking is always improved through practice and persistence, but it is only partly true in this fieldwork. Each research, with different purpose each time, is always dynamic (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). A researcher encounters different people, environments, interview locations and stages in different times. Every interview is unique and there are a lot of new things to learn and practice because research deals with a cluster of interviewees who have thinking abilities. Obviously, a researcher may obtain different answers for the same question when employing the different way of asking. During the fieldwork, the interviewer wanted to know why quite a lot of Muslim women

could not go to higher education. In one interview, the question focused on the difficulties of pursuing higher education while in another interview, the interviewee was inquired directly about it without any probe; as a result, two different answers were obtained as follows:

R: So, what do you think why quite a lot of Muslim women do not go to university?

I1: I think (rising voice, excited), first I think more are going to university definitely, I think those who are not going university for a number of factors...

R: Are there any difficulties for Muslim women to go to university, special difficulties?

I2: I would (pause) I would say there are still a lot of Muslim women out there who have a lot of difficulties trying to pursue their education because of...

There are quite a lot of examples in this fieldwork to prove the significance of the way of asking questions. However, in the real world, the researcher found it difficult to choose the way which is considered the best or appropriate during the interviews, especially when further questions were put forward according to interviewees' answers because the process of the interview is dynamic, it changes all the time. It is not probably wrong to claim that the way of asking question is the most difficult thing in the interviews. The interviewer paid close attention to it, but she had to confess some ways adopted in the interview might not be appropriate in this fieldwork.

Conclusion

Conducting research is indeed an interesting as well as challenging experience on the part of the researcher. It is difficult to say which part or stage is the most important in the research process. In reality, every single step or stage converges into a full research. In case of research conducted using semi-structured open-ended interview technique, interpretability of the analysed data is one key issue on the part of the researcher specially when findings aim to underline socio-culturally sensitive issues. For this study, socio-cultural and religious sensitivity aspects of research certainly add extra challenges for researchers to collect, analyse and interpret data. Therefore, reflective research practice always enhances understanding of developing research methodology for using interview method to explore sensitive issues in different contexts.

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